

Were the Original First-Nations People "Immigrants"?

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*"The Elders say that 'we were always here. Our Creator put us here.
We never walked across no land bridge between the old and new worlds."*

(Anonymous, in Demas 1993:3)

A prominent theory espoused by North American archaeologists maintains that the original ancestral Indigenous immigrated across a Bering Strait "land bridge" to North America. Many Indigenous thinkers are of the opinion that non-Indigenous persons have seized upon this theory with nefarious intent. According to Tsimshian author Lynda Gray (2011: 81), the Euro-Americans manufactured this theory "in an attempt to prove that First Nations people were simply the first immigrants to North America which would absolve non-First Nations people of their guilt for stealing Indigenous lands." Considering the litany of atrocities that Europeans and their descendants visited upon the Native peoples of the Western Hemisphere, this conspiracy theory may not be all that far-fetched. Nonetheless, I am more inclined to believe that the earliest peopling of Turtle Island (North America) *was* realised by immigration of one kind or another.

There are two versions of the earliest population history of the Canadian land mass. One originated among the Natives themselves. The other was generated by persons who follow the dictates of Western science (Archaeology and related disciplines).

The Indigenous version is an example of what Western scholars denominate "mythic." A mythic account is a traditional story or narrative, especially one recounting the early history of a people or explaining some natural or socio-cultural phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events (adapted from the Oxford Dictionary definition of "myth"). An Anishinaabe word for such an account is "ätsokan" (Gray 2010:569). Ojibwa scholar Basil Johnston (1999:45) credits the storytellers of long ago with creating the ätsokan.

The Western version of human history is generated by social scientists and historians who utilise the proceeds of geological, palaeoecological, and anthropological disciplines, and the proceeds of archival research, to produce and test hypotheses about past human behaviour and their environmental adaptations.

A process that has typified human history throughout time and the world over is *migration*, minimally defined as "permanent relocation of an individual or group from one place to another." In addition, we can distinguish between *immigration* (in-migration) and *emigration* (out-migration). As an example, in 1963 I moved from Nova Scotia to Manitoba. In the process I emigrated from the Maritimes and, in so doing and at the same time, I immigrated to the Prairies.

The operative question here is, how (by what means) did the earliest people come to arrive in North America in the first place?

In their ätsokan genesis account, the Algonquian-speaking Ojibwa maintain that their primeval ancestors were lowered down to Turtle Island (North America) "from the stars" as spirit beings (Stonechild, citing D. Musqua 2016:45, 49) and became full-fledged humans upon their arrival on earth. This would qualify as a long-range migration. By contrast, the Western scientific hypothesis calls for a very long-range, very long-term, discrete migration, from the cradle of humankind in Africa and across central Asia to Alaska via northeastern Siberia and Beringia (the so-called "Bering Strait land bridge"). Then, from this Alaskan point of departure, they or their direct descendants immigrated southward into the interior of the continent, giving rise in due course to the many cultural groups (nations, tribes, bands) that in the fullness of time variously took up residence throughout the Western Hemisphere.

As can be seen from the scientific interpretation summarised above, extensive migrations were involved in the earliest peopling of most of the planet, including the widespread movements of the populations whose descendants eventually

came to be called "Algonquian." However, that contradicts the emic concept of the ancestral arrival on Turtle Island, as summarised above, and so it is rejected by traditional people.

Interestingly, Lynda Gray (2011:82) poses the question: why would modern-day First Nations people, whose very existence is based on oral history and honouring their ancestors, accept the idea that those earliest ancestors came from somewhere else [i.e., Siberia], thereby denying their heritage and betraying the ancestors? But they (the earliest Ancestors) did come from somewhere else ... according to the peoples' own beliefs, their primeval forebears arrived on Earth in spirit form from outer space with the assistance of none other than the Benevolent Creator Being himself. This event is compatible with the basic definition of "migration" as presented above, so we can say that the founding ancestors well and truly "immigrated" to Planet Earth.

In sum, to answer the question posed in the title of this paper, there are two opposing and very different paradigms that describe the first-ever advent of humans in North America: mythic and scientific. The former has the journey originating in the heavens; the latter, in a migration from the Earth's Eastern Hemisphere to the Western ... and so the immigration theme, in my opinion, is integral to both of them.

As to whether or not the scientific version of the Aboriginal arrival in the "New World" reflects a plot by Western society to discredit the Indigenous belief that they were *always* here and were *not* immigrants from somewhere else, I will have to leave the resolution of that one to a higher intellect than mine.

References

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